
**State Government & Tribal Affairs
Committee**

HB 1730

Brief Description: Regarding the office of regulatory assistance.

Sponsors: Representatives Linville, Kretz, Ericks, Hunt, Armstrong and Short.

Brief Summary of Bill

- Provides additional specificity for services provided by the Office of Regulatory Assistance and clarifies expectations for permitting agencies and project proponents seeking assistance with the permitting process.

Hearing Date: 2/13/09

Staff: Pam Madson (786-7111)

Background:

The Office of Regulatory Assistance (ORA) provides environmental permitting assistance in navigating the permit process and provides assistance to small businesses by helping identify licensing and permitting requirements and providing other business assistance. The ORA also works to improve the regulatory process.

Under statute, the ORA is administered by the Office of the Governor but some staff is located in the Department of Ecology (DOE) and the Department of Information Services, both in Olympia and in regional offices around the state. The office is staffed through interagency agreements with the other agencies and the Office of Financial Management.

The ORA provides services to its clients through a help desk that answers questions about permitting and state regulations. Regional staff facilitates, coordinates, and resolves conflicts that arise during the permitting process. The ORA acts as an informal coordinating agency for

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the permitting process. The ORA staff assists in the process but does not participate in permit decisions made by the permitting agencies.

The ORA may provide scoping services to project proponents at their request and may enter into cost-reimbursement agreements. These agreements provide for recovery of reasonable costs from the project proponent for the ORA and the permitting agencies. Reasonable costs do not cover hiring temporary employees.

In 2007 the ORA was subject to a sunset review by the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee (JLARC). The ORA was reauthorized and a new sunset date was established for 2011. The JLARC recommended that the ORA improve the tracking of its activities.

Summary of Bill:

The ORA provides accountability, timeliness, and predictability for businesses, the public, and government agencies involved in the permitting process. The ORA is to provide direction and practical resources for improving the regulatory process. Those involved in projects requiring permits should have access to information on turnaround times for permit decisions based on the permitting experience with like projects, on information required to make a permitting decision, and on the frequency of requests for additional or different information.

The Director of the ORA (Director) is appointed by the Governor and may employ staff directly or through contracting with another state agency to carry out its duties.

Services Provided to Project Proponents.

Services provided by the ORA are defined more specifically to reflect current practice. Services include:

- acting as the central point of contact for project proponents and providing general coordination services,
- verifying that the project proponent has all information needed for required permits;
- assisting to resolve conflicts or inconsistencies in permit requirements and conditions;
- monitoring adherence to agreed schedules; and
- helping local jurisdictions comply with local development permitting by providing best practices and facilitating early involvement of state agencies.

The ORA must provide reports to the Legislature by September 1, 2009, and biennially thereafter on the office's performance and on improvements that can be made to the overall system.

Project Scoping.

Project proponents may request a project scoping that identifies issues and information needed for the project from proponents and agencies. Scoping includes a clear understanding of process, timing, and permit sequencing. The ORA determines the level of scoping based on complexity of the project and experience of those involved.

Fully Coordinated Permit Process.

A fully coordinated permit process is an approach to a project based on a written agreement between the project proponent, the ORA, and the participating agencies. If a project proponent requests this process, the project may be designated if the proponent enters into a cost

reimbursement agreement. A project may be designated a fully coordinated project if it is an industrial project of statewide significance or the Director determines that it qualifies based on certain criteria.

The ORA serves as the central point of contact for the participants in the permitting of the project and provides coordination and facilitation services. The ORA must contact local, federal, or tribal jurisdictions that have permit requirements for a project and invite their participation in the coordinated process. Within 30 days of the designation of a project as a fully coordinated project, the ORA will convene a work plan meeting to coordinate the permitting schedule and set timelines and expectations. A work plan meeting includes discussion of costs and fee arrangements.

Cost-Reimbursement Agreements.

A cost-reimbursement agreement involves the project proponent, the ORA, and the permitting agencies. A cost-reimbursement agreement must identify with as much specificity as possible the tasks of each agency and the maximum costs for work conducted under the agreement. It must include a schedule stating the estimated time for initial review, an estimated number of revision cycles, an estimate of billable hours and the rate-per-hour. The ORA, the DOE, the Department of Natural Resources, the Department of Health, the Department of Fish and Wildlife, and local air pollution control authorities, may hire temporary employees and outside consultants whose costs are covered under an agreement to ensure that the agency's capacity to process other permits is maintained.

The ORA statute is not to be construed to limit or abridge the powers and duties of a participating permit agency, and may not substitute its judgment for that of the agency on nonprocedural matters.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Effective Date: The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of the session in which the bill is passed.